



**Forest, Watershed and Fire Management
Water and Natural Resources Committee
July 25, 2013**

Background – Wildland Fire and Watersheds

Since 2011 the State of New Mexico has experienced several large fires that impacted communities and their watersheds.

- The Tres Lagunas fire which threatened many smaller communities near Pecos, NM burned approximately 10,000 acres.
- Silver fire which threatened the community of Kingston, NM burned approximately 137,000 acres.
- The Thompson Ridge fire which threatened many smaller communities near Jemez, NM burned approximately 24,000 acres.
- The two biggest fires in recorded history, were 2012's Whitewater-Baldy complex surpassing 2011's Las Conchas Fire in acres burned (approximately 297,000 to 156,000 respectively).
- The 2012 Little Bear Fire, in Lincoln County near Ruidoso, was the most destructive, burning more than 240 homes.
- Several of these large fires had direct impacts to watersheds. They caused floods, damaged infrastructure and disrupted municipal surface water supplies.

Challenges

The State is confronting the impacts of drought on forest and watershed health.

- **New Mexico faces long term forest health challenges.** The long term outlook isn't favorable in terms of forest health. Research published last October shows that forests in the Southwestern US have experienced more drought stress since 2000 than during any other period in recorded history other than the 1200s and 1500s. The years of highest drought stress correlate with large insect outbreaks, declining forest health and wildfire occurrence.
- **Wildfires aren't what they used to be.** The most damaging fires in recent years occurred under extreme conditions, leading to "uncharacteristic" fire behaviors such as the rolling vortices that incinerated pinon-juniper mesa tops during the Las Conchas fire. Conditions during these types of fires were stacked against us – high temperatures, low humidity, strong and erratic winds and live fuel moistures approaching the level of moisture in stacked firewood.

That means, during fire season, the trees and other vegetation standing in the forests are nearly as dry as the firewood we stack outside our houses.

- **Despite recent monsoon rains, drought impacts persist.** Most of the state has experienced severe to exceptional drought conditions through the first half of 2013. If conditions do not improve, the impacts of forest insects and disease, length of fire season and size of wildfires will likely persist into the future. Significant and sustained moisture will be needed to make a substantial difference to the current forest and watershed health in the state.
- **The situation is complicated by federal spending cuts.** Nationally, federal budgets for forest fuels treatments on state and private lands have been declining for several years. In New Mexico, federal funding for hazardous fuels treatments on state and private lands went from \$7,237,242 in federal FY2008 to \$4,026,250 in federal FY2010 to \$1,867,613 in FY2013.
- **Institutional impediments take a long time to address.** Even though federal land management agencies recognize a number of barriers that slow down the planning process and make it harder to get projects on the ground, a permanent solution literally requires an act of Congress. In a letter to US Department of Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack, Governor Martinez points out her concerns regarding the policies and requests that he work with Congress and federal land management agency leaders to update the policies, especially those that delay projects that could protect communities. That letter was sent less than one year ago, right after the Little Bear Fire, near Ruidoso.

In the meantime the State and its partners are limited to using existing authorities.

Opportunities

The State is responding to these challenges by:

- monitoring forest health, observing wildland fire effects, and using that information to guide actions;
- Maintaining good working relationships with federal, state and local partners, as well as other stakeholders;
- prioritizing where treatments are conducted based on a combination of field conditions, urgency and opportunity;
- maintaining the pace of treatments; and
- taking steps to increase both the pace and scale of treatments that will protect forested watersheds and communities at risk.